

Reimagining Sita: Ecofeminist Perspectives in the Poems of Nandini Sahu and Toru Dutt

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Article Detail:	Abstract
Received: 28 May 2025; Received in revised form: 23 Jun 2025; Accepted: 27 Jun 2025; Available online: 30 Jun 2025 ©2025 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). Keywords – Ecofeminism, Woman, Sita, Culture, Patriarchal, Shakti	<i>The figure of Sita, most famously known as the central female character from the ancient Indian epic the Ramayana, has historically been regarded as the epitome of feminine virtue, purity, and sacrifice. She has long been a part of the mental framework of every Indian girl, who is taught the duties of womanhood through her character. The influence of Sita is so powerful that women succumb to societal pressures, feeling they must emulate her, even when they should resist. The patriarchal narrative has imposed a singular, submissive image of Sita that glorifies woman's subjugation. In contrast, modern writers have reimagined Sita as a symbol deeply connected to nature embodying vibrant energy of nature. This reinterpretation integrates the ecofeminist idea that women and nature are interlinked forces of nurture and power. Thus, contemporary portrayals challenge the traditional, limiting image and bring out a new Sita who is both nature's daughter and an agent of her own destiny. This research paper explores the poem "Sita" from an ecofeminist perspective, focusing on the new dimensions of her character erstwhile ignored by the writers. It draws on critical interpretations, notably by Nandini Sahu and Toru Dutt, to reveal Sita's connection to her inner feminine and healing aspect of nature.</i>

Introduction

Ecofeminism is a critical framework that argues that the domination of women and exploitation of the environment are interconnected, stemming from hierarchical power structures that marginalize both. Ecofeminist scholars highlight the shared experiences of subjugation and resilience between women and nature, calling for an ethical realignment that values feminine and ecological sustainability. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva link ecofeminism to the concepts of Veda and argue that women are inherently connected with and protectors of nature – both support each other. Vandana Shiva, in an interview, said that she was influenced by the Chipko Movement, in which women hugged trees

and protected them from being cut down. (Vedas and Ecofeminism, Interview, Infinity Foundation Official, 2020, You Tube) Ecofeminists envision a new world in which the marginalized are cared for and advocate for a more holistic view of nature – connecting nature, women, and other social constructs such as peasants and farmers, who work at the grassroots level to create value. They oppose all systems that keep any part of society in a subordinate position while others remain privileged. In this Research Paper an attempt has been made to analyse the poem "Sita" by Toru Dutt and Nandini Sahu from an ecofeminist perspective. Sita is viewed not only as a woman subjected to patriarchy but also as a symbol of nature's suffering and wisdom. Her

narrative echoes the plight of both the feminine and natural worlds under exploitative social norms, making her a potent figure for ecofeminist study.

Sita as Ecofeminist Icon in Nandini Sahu's Poem

Sita is one of the cultural icons of Indian womanly sacrifice and has often been re-imagined by modern poets. The mythological character of Sita was found by King Janaka from the womb of Mother Earth while he was tilling the field. Sita symbolizes nature – *Prakriti* – and possesses all the virtuous traits of *Prakriti*, or the Mother Earth. The mythological Sita endures all suffering, remains with her husband Rama through times of trouble, bravely facing Ravana, undergoing the *Agni Pariksha* to prove her chastity. Rama exiles her, she goes to the ashram of Valmiki, raises her two sons, Luv and Kush. Rama and the people of Ayodhya finally recall her, but she does not return but instead chooses to go back to the lap of goddess earth from which she came. The poem by Nandini Sahu is a beautiful portrayal of a new Sita—one who is *Prakriti*, who embodies Mother Nature, born out of it and dissolving into it. At the same time, she is also an embodiment of *Shakti*, a woman of power who can destroy when needed. She is full of kindness, abundance, and grace. Besides nurturing Luv and Kush, she displays many moods and can take on various forms. She is both embedded in and transcends the passions of a woman. She possesses the power to mourn, to resist, and to rewrite her own story. In Nandini Sahu's poem "Sita," the protagonist transcends her traditional role as the idealized, submissive wife bound by duty. Sahu redefines Sita as an empowered, resilient ecofeminist figure who challenges patriarchal oppression and embodies the deep bond between woman and nature. For example, Sita's decision to reject further trials by her husband Rama and return to Mother Earth signifies her reclaiming autonomy and spiritual belonging to the natural world. The poem's depiction of Mother Earth rising to embrace Sita upon her departure symbolizes nature as a nurturing refuge and a source of divine strength for women oppressed by social systems. Nandini Sahu's Sita is not just a woman who continually sacrifices or embodies traditional virtues; she is also a manifestation of nature, possessing both creative and destructive aspects. Sita can be as innocent as a child born from the furrows of the earth, as sorrowful as

one lamenting the brevity of human existence, and as bound as a bird kept in distant captivity. She is depicted as a young girl full of dreams for her future, yet she is also capable of enduring the fiery ordeal of *Agni Pariksha* and even causing the downfall of a figure as powerful as Ravana. Sita is presented as a perfect being, embodying power, creativity, and maternal qualities—she is the force that makes the universe function. At the same time, Sita bears suffering like any ordinary human. She possesses deep kindness and compassion, yet she can also become fiercely destructive, unbound by limitations and unafraid of death. Nandini Sahu's poem thus crafts Sita as a figure of abundance and grace, with variable moods and forms. She is both rooted in, and transcends, the traditional passions of women—innocent and blessed, yet resilient and bold. Sahu's Sita articulates that womanhood that encompasses complexity—incorporating strength, love, rebellion, and redemption—thereby repudiating fixed, essentialist feminine roles. It connects the character of Sita directly to nature, encapsulating the ecofeminist concept that women and nature are integral to one another. Traditionally, the figure of Sita in the Ramayana has embodied agency that sustains the universe in its nurturing form. Sahu reinterprets this mythological character, infusing her with dominant agency rather than a subordinate, patriarchal role. Here, Sita is reimagined as a powerful force—akin to the concept of *shakti* as manifested in goddess Durga, who is worshipped in nine forms, each encompassing both creative and destructive powers. Sahu's Sita represents Mother Nature, often subjected to control and domination through capitalistic and patriarchal narratives, but unlike the traditional figure, Sita in this poem emerges as a dominant force that cannot be restricted or confined within boundaries. She possesses deep understanding of the intricate realities of nature, abundant power, and the ability to create and transform. The Sita crafted by Sahu is not weak or passive; instead, she is a force of resistance and renewal, embodying knowledge, abundance, and the power to write her own destiny. The poem's lines, "I am *Prakriti*; born of and fading into Mother Nature. / I am *Sakti*; phenomenal destroyer of Ravana,"¹ (Sahu Canto xxiv pg111) highlights Sita's dual identity as both a natural force (*Prakriti*) and a dynamic spiritual power (*Sakti*). This

fusion of ecology and feminine divinity underscores the ecofeminist idea that women and nature share creative and destructive potential, challenging the dichotomy of passive woman/nature versus active man/culture. Moreover, Sahu's poem critiques patriarchal tendencies to control and exploit women and nature alike, suggesting that the liberation of both requires recognition of their intrinsic worth. Nandini Sahu portrays Sita as every woman—she is the girl, the infant abandoned in a hospital by her family, and the woman who has endured unspeakable suffering throughout the ages. (Sahu Canto I pg. 2) Despite this timeless suffering, Sita retains her power and resilience. Sahu emphasizes female bonding and sisterhood, highlighting the influence of many powerful women on Sita in her work, such as Anusuya, Ahalya, Maitreyi, Gargi, Lopamudra, Rukmini, and Queen Vaidehi. These women form a network of support and solidarity, reinforcing the idea of female strength. Sita is depicted as a single mother raising Luv and Kush, the "Sita-Putra,"² (Sahu Canto I pg.3) emphasizing her role as a nurturing and powerful woman who has endured since ancient times. Her suffering has not diminished her strength; rather, it has endowed her with immense power. She transcends the image of a woman who is merely exiled; instead, she becomes one who exercises the power to say "no"³ (Sahu, Canto viii pg.38). She chooses not to return when called back but instead goes back to the Earth, her mother. Sahu also reflects on the sorrows of Urmila, left behind when Lakshman accompanies Rama into exile. She questions Urmila's place in the idealized "Rama Rajya,"⁴ (Sahu, Canto iv pg.15) a compassionate kingdom that patriarchal narratives proclaim. These are difficult questions that patriarchal society fails to answer because it values only predetermined roles and appearances. Sahu's poem brings these overlooked voices and dilemmas to the forefront, challenging established patriarchal values and offering a rich picture of womanhood and female endurance.

Ecofeminist Dimensions in Toru Dutt's "Sita"

Toru Dutt's short poem "Sita" offers another rich text for ecofeminist analysis. It presents Sita's exile in the forest not as mere punishment but as a profound confluence of nature's rhythms and symbolism. The poem's vivid imagery of "winding waters"⁵(Dutt)

and "dark wood"⁶(Dutt) conveys the forest as a living, complex ecosystem. It mirrors Sita's internal exile, solitude, and resilience. This natural setting becomes a dynamic participant in her story, sympathizing with her and thus showing interconnectedness of woman and environment in Indian cultural consciousness. The poem becomes a vehicle to convey cultural, ecological and moral values embodied in pathetic tale of Sita. Sita's endurance and moral fortitude amidst this tension exemplify eco-cultural resilience. It portrays the sorrowful figure of Sita, who has been abandoned by Rama and exiled to the forest. The story is narrated by a mother to her children, who listen intently as she recounts Sita's tale. Sita's exile places her in a beautiful natural setting—surrounded by flowers, creepers that embrace tall trees, peacocks dancing, and deer running through the forest. Nearby the smoke rises from the huts where people prepare their meals, evoking a serene yet melancholic atmosphere. Despite the natural beauty around her, Sita remains enveloped in sorrow—something the mother's story conveys deeply to the children. The poem presents the healing aspect of nature that embalms the wounds of Sita. Though isolated, her grief in loneliness, is contrasted to vibrant and effusive life of nature. The children's silence at the end of the tale can be interpreted as a reflection of narrator's husband's return or, symbolically, of the patriarchal society that silences the tears and suffering of women like Sita. Though virtuous and an exemplary wife and mother, Sita endures great suffering that patriarchal narratives neither acknowledge nor make central in mythological texts. Her pain remains a marginalized theme, overshadowed by dominant patriarchal values.

Comparison of Eastern and Western Ecofeminism on Sita

A notable discourse in ecofeminist studies is the differentiation between Western and Eastern approaches. Western ecofeminism tends to emphasize women's and nature's shared subjugation under patriarchal power as causes for their exploitation, advocating for radical socio-political change to dismantle these systems. Eastern ecofeminism, conversely, often situates the woman-nature relationship within a holistic worldview of interconnectedness and spiritual unity, valuing

harmony with nature as a cultural ideal. In relation to Sita, this divergence is significant. Western ecofeminist readings may interpret Sita's sufferings—her exile, trials, and societal judgment—as emblematic of patriarchal violence deserving critique and resistance. Eastern perspectives might stress Sita's ultimate return to Mother Earth as a natural, sacred reconciliation reflecting life cycles and cultural bonds with nature. Both perspectives illuminate aspects of Sita's character and cultural symbolism, enriching understanding of her role as an ecofeminist and ecocultural icon.

Conclusion

Women and nature have historically been dominated and controlled by patriarchal and masculine power structures. However, a serious and critical examination of these intertwined issues can empower women to reclaim their rightful place in society, while also enabling us to protect nature from ruthless exploitation and pollution driven by capitalist and patriarchal forces. The story and reimagining of Sita by modern poets like Nandini Sahu and Toru Dutt lead us towards envisioning a holistic worldview—one where the upliftment of the feminine and the natural world are interconnected and essential for the progress of society as a whole. Such a perspective challenges predetermined notions and prejudices surrounding gender constructs and advocates for comprehensive, unbiased understanding. By exploring well-known myth of Sita, which is deeply embedded in Indian cultural consciousness, fresh interpretations can bring forth new insights.

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